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High Yields from Course Guides at Li Ka Shing Library

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Abstract

At the Li Ka Shing Library, the librarians started building course guides to support students working on their assignments. The reasons for creating course guides and examples of course guides with their usage statistics are explored. The research librarians got high returns from their course guides as shown by usage statistics and unsolicited feedback from faculty. It was a good way to embed the Library and its resources into the courses taught, to increase awareness of library resources and to keep the library visible.

Keywords: Course guides, library resources awareness, library visibility

Introduction

The research librarians at the Singapore Management University Li Ka Shing (LKS) Library experimented with different types of guides, including course guides. After converting the HTML guides to LibGuides from Springshare, the number of research guides grew quickly since October 2009. The research librarians spent time creating the guides and had focused on course guides. Was all the man hours put in worth the investment? To answer this question, the usage of some course guides will be studied with a comparison of the usage of course guides and equivalent subject guides.

Course Guides versus Subject Guides

Subject guides “are usually annotated bibliographies of reference materials, web sites, databases, and journals within a specific discipline ... list basic sources rather than serve as comprehensive bibliographies” (Reeb & Gibbons, 2004, p. 123). Course guides would include the same type of resources as subject guides, but would go beyond basic and general sources, to include “resources for a particular course” (Courtois, Higgins & Kapur, 2005, p. 188). Adebonojo (2010, p. 401) found that, “students needed a secondary level of support when embarking on research assignments, one specifically related to the course content for an individual assignment.”

Horne, Adams, Cook, Heidig and Miller (2009) found that 90% of the students surveyed at Cornell University and Princeton University said that they would like more course guides. Frigo, Harris, Liss and Seale (2009) found that the students at Boston College and Grand Valley State University has a stronger preference for course-specific and subject-specific guides compared to general subject guides.

The literature indicated that course guides would be more relevant to students. This gave the research librarians the impetus to focus on creating course guides. For the LKS Library, the course guides are an avenue to:

- Provide direct support to faculty for teaching
- Work with faculty on library instruction and assignment resources
- Promote the resources available for the course
- Provide targeted information
- Promote the Library’s information services

The usage of a number of course guides were studied to see if they met the course objectives and the library objectives.

Academic Writing Course Guide

The LKS Library conducts library training sessions for the students taking the Academic Writing (WRIT001) course every term. Previously the session was taught using PowerPoint slides. In September 2010, a course guide was created to provide links to databases and to the content used in the sessions. Between September and December 2010, the course guide had a total of 8,512 hits. There were 528 students taking the course, or an average of 16 hits per student.

In January 2011, the course guide was enhanced to play a more central role during the library training sessions. It was used to teach the sessions with some supplementary PowerPoint slides. The research librarians conducted 27 library training sessions in February and 1 session in March 2011. There were 650 students taking the course. Between January and April 2011, the course guide had a total of 12,679 hits or an average of 19 hits per student.

The library training sessions for Academic Writing focused on:

- Brainstorming for assignment topic
- Finding keywords for a topic
- Searching for articles using databases
- Evaluation of resources

Table 1: Hits on Academic Writing Course Guide in 2010 & 2011

2010	Number of Guide Hits	2011	Number of Guide Hits	% change
Sep	5102	Jan	379	
Oct	2315	Feb	7967	
Nov	985	Mar	4023	
Dec	119	Apr	310	
Total	8512		12679	49

After the course guide was used to teach the session, the usage had increased by 49% as seen in Table 1. From the detailed usage statistics of the course guide in Table 2, it can be seen that the students were viewing the main content pages: Representing Gender, Evaluating Sources and Brainstorming.

Table 2: Page Hits on Academic Writing Course Guide in 2011

Page	Number of Page Hits in 2011				
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	Total
Home	168	2209	1557	106	4040
Representing Gender	93	1883	1687	104	3767
Evaluating Sources	31	1447	266	15	1759
Brainstorming	14	597	177	10	798
Additional Resources	10	390	109	4	513
Mind Mapping	15	418	39	25	497
Total Number of Hits	379	7967	4023	310	12679

The Representing Gender page had the relevant databases presented in search widget boxes which were visually attractive but LibGuides was not able to provide data on its usage. The course guide had the highest number of hits in February when most of the training sessions were conducted. In March 2011, the course guide had 4,023 hits which showed that the students were using the guide while working on their assignment due in early April.

During the sessions, we also promoted the Library's Information Services. The Academic Writing students accounted for 11% of email queries in February and March 2011. We also had many requests for research consultations from the Academic Writing students. This showed that the promotion of Information Services was also effective.

International Economics Course Guide

Students taking the course International Economics A (ECON103) were required to do a project presentation and a paper. The paper must have references. The students must relate their arguments to current economic events or trends. This meant that the students needed to do a literature search and to read up on current economic events.

The research librarian for Economics built the course guide to support the students in doing the assignment. There was no opportunity to do a library session for the students, but the faculty agreed to include a link to the course guide in the learning management system.

Over two terms in 2010, the course had 861 students. The course guide had over 6,000 hits in 2010 with an average of 7 hits per student. As seen in Table 3, 73% of the hits were for databases followed by 16% on websites and 11% on journals.

Table 3: Hits on International Economics A Course Guide in 2010

2010 (Jan-Dec)	Number	%
Total Number of Hits	6032	
Total Hits for Links	1367	
> Hits for links to library databases	998	73
> Hits for links to journals	150	11
> Hits for links to websites	219	16

Among the websites listed in the guide, were sites for statistical data by the United Nations, World Bank, and OECD. The usage of the guide and its links was in line with the assignment needs; to search databases, to obtain statistical data and to check out current economic events information available from relevant websites.

Management of People at Work Course Guide

Students taking the Management of People at Work (OBHR101) course were required to do a group research project. They had to find good empirical research in top journals and to find articles with an applied feel from good scholarly journals. This meant that the students needed to do a literature search and to know which journals to focus their search.

The research librarian supporting Management built the guide to support the students in their assignment. One of the faculty teaching the course agreed to the librarian coming to his class and to include a link to the guide in the learning management system.

A total of 622 students took the course Management of People at Work with 177 students under the faculty the research librarian collaborated with. For the period August to December 2010, the guide had over 2,800 hits, with an average of 16 hits per student taught by the faculty or 5 hits per student taking the OBHR101 course. As seen in Table 4, 54% of the hits on the resources listed in the guide went to databases and 23% went to journals. Due to the nature of the assignment, students were using the databases to find articles but they were also focused on using the journals listed in the guide.

Table 4: Hits on Management of People at Work Course Guide in 2010

2010 (Aug-Dec)	Number of Hits	%
Total Number of Hits	2871	
Total Hits for Links	869	
> Hits for links to library databases	469	54
> Hits for links to journals	205	23
> Hits for links to course readings	179	20
> Hits for links to websites & others	22	3

Introduction to Political & Policy Studies Course Guide

The School of Social Sciences offered a course on Introduction to Political & Policy Studies (POSC003) taught in January 2011 to 90 students. The students taking the course were required to submit think pieces where thoughtful arguments were made and supported by examples from some countries and references used were reputable. This meant that the students needed to do a literature search and to know have background and current information for some countries.

The research librarian for Social Sciences built the guide to teach the library session and to highlight the resources available for the course. The library training session was conducted at the beginning of the term in January. The faculty also agreed to include a link to the guide in the learning management system.

For the period January to May 2011, the guide had 747 hits, with an average of 8 hits per student. As seen in Table 5, 56% of the hits for links were for databases and 23% were for journals. This was in line with the faculty's emphasis on literature searching and using reputable sources like journals.

Table 5: Hits on Course Guide for Introduction to Political & Policy Studies in 2011

2010 (Jan-May)	Number	%
Total Number of Hits	747	
Total Hits for Links	194	
> Hits for links to databases	108	56
> Hits for links to journals	45	23
> Hits for links to websites & others	41	21

Global Software Project Management Course Guide

The School of Information Systems offered the course on Global Software Project Management (IS411) in January 2011 to 34 students. The research librarian supporting Information Systems built the course guide for IS411 in collaboration with the faculty. There was no opportunity to do a library training session for the students, but the faculty asked his students to complete an activity sheet using the course guide. In the period February to May 2010, the course guide had a total of 187 hits, with an average of 5 hits per student.

Advanced Equity Analysis Course Guide

The School of Business offered a course on Advanced Equity Analysis (FNCE622) taught in January 2011 to 44 postgraduate students. The students would need to do valuations on a publicly traded firm and would need to obtain the firm's financial data. The research librarian supporting Finance created the course guide. As seen in Table 6, the course guide had 909 hits in the period January to May 2011 with an average of 20 hits per student. The students were mostly using the databases listed, which accounted for 84% of the hits on links.

Table 6: Hits on Course Guide for Advanced Equity Analysis in 2011

2011 (Jan-May)	Number	%
Total Number of Hits	909	
Total Hits for Links	226	
> Hits for links to databases	191	84
> Hits for links to journals & websites	35	16

Financial Accounting Course Guide

The School of Accountancy offered a course on Financial Accounting (ACCT611) taught in January 2011 to 23 postgraduate students. The research librarian supporting Accounting created a guide for the course. As seen in Table 7, the guide had 487 hits in the period January to May 2011 with an average of 21 hits per student. The students were mostly using the databases listed, which accounted for 67% of the hits on links.

Table 7: Hits on Course Guide for Financial Accounting in 2011

2011 (Jan-May)	Number	%
Total Number of Hits	487	
Total Hits for Links	123	
> Hits for links to databases	83	67
> Hits for links to journals & websites	40	23

Promotion of Guides

Strutin (2008) suggested that, “Research guides need to be advocated on a much larger scale ... It is a shame that these are practically a ‘secret’ to the majority of students.” At the LKS Library, the guides are promoted our guides in a variety of ways:

- Listed as a resource in the learning management system
- Used and referred to during library training
- Discovered as a resource in our Catalogue and Google
- Listed on our library website

When the student sees the course guide in the SMU learning management system (LMS) (see Figure A), the Library’s course guide is viewed as part of the course. This allows the library and its resources to be embedded in the course.

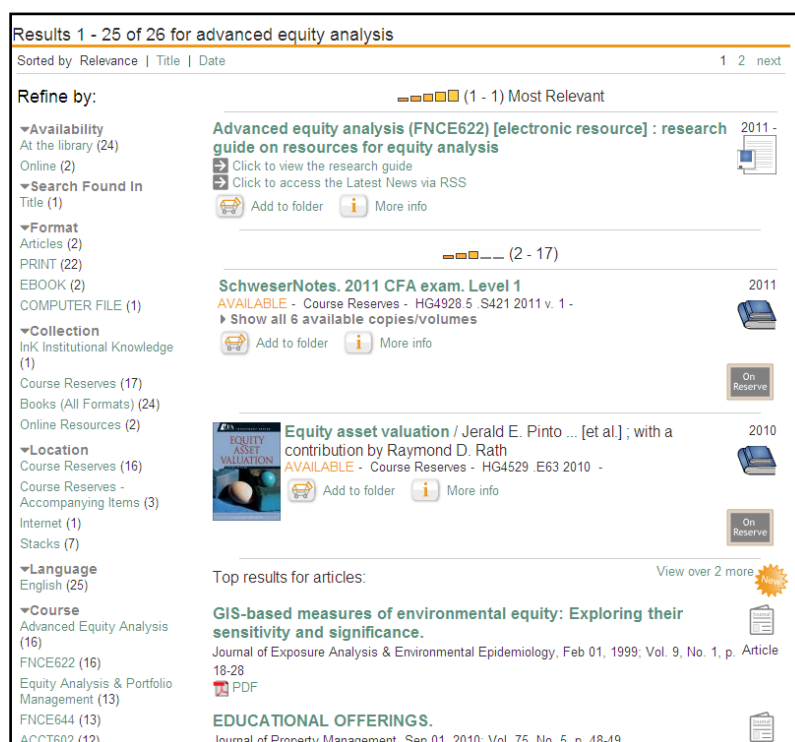
Figure A: Course page in LMS with a link to a course guide



During library training sessions, the students are told about the guide or actually use the guide during the session. At the end of the session, the research librarians also let the students know that they can be contacted for further help. Even when no training session is given to the students, the contact information of the research librarian is prominently displayed on the course guide.

The guides on the LibGuides platform are indexed by Google and can be found when using Google to search. To further enhance our research guides discoverability, they are catalogued and can be found when searched in the Library Catalogue. When the student searches for his course code or course name, the course guide appears together with the recommended textbooks for the course.

Figure B: Course Guide in Library Catalogue Search



Feedback from Faculty

Barr (2010, p. 296) found that students and instructors were more likely to use library resources when they are embedded in course management systems and “in addition to better serving our patrons, this is a great way to initiate and maintain contact with faculty and to keep the library visible.” At the LKS Library, after creating the course guides, the research librarians received very good unsolicited qualitative feedback from the faculty. The examples of the feedback received were:

“Thanks for setting up the research guide - gosh, I have never had this level of library support for a course before. It is very comprehensive in coverage.” - Economics faculty member

“I am encouraging my students to access the resource page you developed.” - Business faculty member

“That’s fabulous! I like that everything is under one roof. ... If you could make a similar one for the IB class, that would be great.” - Business faculty member

“Thanks for the link, I just uploaded it. ...Would it be possible to custom-make the page for two of my other courses?” - Social Sciences faculty member

There was no quantitative feedback collected from the faculty and this would be an area to improve upon for future research.

Cost and Benefits of Building Course Guides

There are costs involved in creating and updating course guides. The manpower costs include the cost of spending time on creating new course guides, finding relevant resources to add to the guide, and updating the guide before the term starts. The research librarians also need to spend time contacting the faculty to get their buy-in, to understand the course structure and the assignment requirements and to customize the content for the course guide.

With the creation of a number of course guides for a school, there will be some duplication of content across the course guides and the subject guide, if any. However, for the convenience of the user, the course guide would pull all the common resources together and include the relevant databases, some relevant books, articles and other resources organized along the same lines as the course. One could question whether this is spoon feeding the students. The course guide acts as a one-stop shop and a good starting place for the student, but it does not provide every article or resource that is relevant to all the assignment topics. One could also say that students should know to look under a subject guide if they are taking a specific course under a discipline, e.g. I am taking the Introduction to Political and Policy Studies course hence I should look for resources in the Political Science subject guide. Streeb and Gibbons (2004,

p. 125) reported that “the concept of disciplines is not usually part of a student’s mental model; therefore, the collocation of resources by discipline is not recognized.” This means that, from the student’s point of view, course guides fit their mental mode better.

On the positive side, it provides the librarian with a means to support faculty in their teaching role and to collaborate with the faculty. When the guide is listed as a resource in the learning management system, it is a way to embed the library, the research librarian and library resources into the course.

The research librarians need to prioritize which courses they will create course guides. It must be noted that not all courses need a course guide. Some courses have no assignment that requires a high degree of reliance on the use of library resources and these courses do not need a course guide.

Comparison of Course & Subject Guides Usage

For the above course guides, the average number of hits per student, ranged from 5 to 19, with hits on library databases taking more than half of the total hits on links in the guide. It can be seen that the course guides were well used and that the students were making use of the databases, journals, and websites listed in the guides.

In 2009, before using LibGuides, our static HTML guides were mostly subject guides without any course guides. The top five subject guides were: Legal Resources, Researching an Industry, Researching Company Information, Marketing Research and Researching Equity. From the web statistics for 2009, the top five guides out of 30 guides had 85% of total guide hits (see Table 8). This meant that the other 25 guides only accounted for 15% of guide hits.

Table 8: Hits for HTML Guides in 2009

Guide Title	Number of Hits	%
Legal Resources	33363	
Researching an Industry	727	
Researching Company Information	469	
Marketing Research	431	
Researching Equity	471	
Subtotal of top 5 guide hits	35461	85%
Total Guide Hits	41519	

Table 9 provides a comparison of the usage of the subject guides and the course guides for selected disciplines for 2011. For the other disciplines in Business and Economics, the research librarians had focused on course guides and had not created subject guides. Hence the usage of these subject guides and course guides could not be compared.

Table 9: Hits for Subject Guides and Course Guides in 2011

Jan-May 2011 Subject guides	Total Hits	Jan-May 2011 Course guides	Total Hits	% Difference in Hits
Accounting	777	ACCT611	487	-37
Equities	703	FNCE622	909	29
Psychology	512	SSRM001	823	60
Political science	299	POSC003	747	150
Information Systems & Management	34	IS411	187	450

For Accounting, the subject guide had more hits compared to the ACCT611 course guide. The course guide was targeted at postgraduate students. The research librarian had not created any course guides for undergraduate students for Accounting, which could explain the higher usage of the Accounting subject guide.

The Psychology and Political Science subject guides had less hits compared to the course guides. The course guides were for Year One students where the number of students taking the course was larger, which could account for the higher number of hits. The Information Systems & Management subject guide had less hits than the IS411 course guide. In this instance, the course guide was for a Year Four course with a smaller number of students but still had more hits than the subject guide. Similarly, the FNCE622 course guide targeted at postgraduate students had more hits than the Equities subject guide.

As seen in Table 9, in 4 out of 5 subject areas, the course guides had the higher number of hits. The percentage difference in the number of hits between the subject guide and course guide, ranged from 30% to 450%.

In 2010, the top 30 guides accounted for 81% of the total hits out of a total of 111 guides. This was a huge improvement from 85% of the usage coming from 5 guides in 2009 (see Table 8). Among the top 30 guides, there were 13 course guides which accounted for 26% of the total guide hits or 32% of the top 30 guide hits (see Table 10). When comparing the number of guide hits in 2009 and 2010, there was an increase of 220% (see Table 9). The way usage statistics was gathered had changed from Google Analytics in 2009 to

LibGuides in 2010 and the numbers may not be comparable. The total guide hits for the period January to June 2011 has reached 132,875 as compared to 133,070 for the whole of 2010. Hence the trend of the usage of the guides was still on the increase.

Table 10: Hits for Top 30 Guides in 2010

Guide Name	Hits	%
Law Research Navigator	33440	
Academic Writing (WRIT001)	8521	
How do I use APA Citation Style	7614	
International Economics A (ECON103)	6032	
How do I use SMU PYXIS?	4196	
Economic Statistics	3933	
Urban Economics and Real Estate (ECON230)	3488	
How do I use Bloomberg	3387	
Careers	3067	
Management of People at Work (OBHR101) Faculty A	2871	
Accounting	2833	
Legal Research & Writing (LAW106)	2658	
How do I use Thomson ONE Banker	2598	
Business, Government and Society (MGMT003) Faculty A	2290	
Company Information	1972	
How do I avoid Plagiarism	1689	
Introduction to Political and Policy Studies (POSC003)	1650	
Management of People at Work (OBHR101) Faculty B	1583	
Political Science	1523	
Social Statistics	1412	
Social Sciences Research Methods (SSRM001)	1326	
Business, Government and Society (MGMT003) Faculty A	1307	
Psychology	1208	
Company Annual Reports	1146	
Islamic Law, Finance and Commerce	1095	
Legal Research	1059	
Macroeconomics for Financial Markets (ECON603)	1039	
Marketing Research (MKTG103)	946	
Foundations in Corporate Communication (COMM102)	922	
How do I Use EndNote X2	904	
Subtotal of top 30 guide hits	107709	81%
Course guide hits in top 30 guides	34633	26%
Total guide hits in 2010	133070	220%
Total guide hits in 2009	41519	

Note: Course guides have a course code and are highlighted

Conclusion

The promotion of course guides is important and is done during library training and reference enquiries (Yeo, 2010, p. 55). An additional venue of promotion was added by linking to course guides in the learning management system. The promotion of the guide done during library training is under the control of the librarian and promotion of the guide in the learning management system needs the support of the faculty. From our experience, faculty members like the guides and would agree to link to the course guide from the learning management system. This helps to keep library visible to the faculty and the students and embeds library resources where they are needed.

The research guides serve as a resource navigator for students and faculty. They also serve as an instructional tool for librarians when they conduct library training sessions for a course. By customizing the contents of a guide to a course, with specific and relevant information for the students, the course guides usage was generally better than the subject guides. The course guides usage statistics also showed that the students were making use of library databases and resources. The course guides help to promote the Library resources, Library services and also to promote our research librarians. The returns from our course guides are high and well worth the effort we put into creating the course guides.

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